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Political Fluctuations in Mesoamerica

JOYCE MARCUS

Dynamic Cycles of Mesoamerican States

Research on Mesoamerican states has reached the point where we are beginning to see repetitive patterns of growth and decline that are widespread in time and space. Most states consisted of a capital city, a nearby core physiographic region, and a series of outlying provinces. Early in each state's history, a major investment was made in annexing outlying provinces through conquest or political and economic alliance. Many states appear to have reached their maximum areal extent early, then slowly contracted as outer provinces became powerful enough to break away. However, it was not uncommon for population growth in the capital and its core physiographic region to increase even as its outermost frontiers were shrinking. An emerging research problem is that many states are too large to be surveyed even by the most indefatigable archaeologist.

Figure 1.
The Hieroglyphic Stairway of Structure 26 at Copán.
©KENNETH GARRETT

THE LAST 25 YEARS OF MESOAMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY have seen intensive studies of cities and extensive surveys of their hinterlands (Figure 1). These studies reveal to us patterns that suggest cultural regularities or universal processes. Beginning as early as 100 BC, we see a cyclic buildup and breakdown of states—large polities with a ruling class, tens of thousands of commoners, a military apparatus, and an administrative hierarchy controlling thousands of square kilometers.

Where data are available, some of the earliest states seem to have arisen in a milieu of competing pre-state societies, when one of those societies began to transform its neighbors into subject provinces. Such early states continued to grow by adding more and more provinces to their periphery, often reaching their maximum territorial size early in their history. Eventually, some of their outlying provinces reached a level of political development and manpower that allowed them to break away and establish their independence. Ironically, the capital cities of these early states (and the core physiographic regions immediately surrounding them) often continued to grow in population and public works for centuries after their outlying provinces had begun to break away. One could view this as a shift from heavy investment in distant areas to heavy investment in one's own backyard (Figure 3).

What occurred next was case-specific. In some cases, several newly formed provinces might ally against their former parent state, thereby weakening its support base so that an inevitable decline set in. In other cases, one of those freed provinces might embark on its own expansionist course. In both cases, the original parent state eventually declined to the level of a secondary administrative center, while one or more of its former provinces rose to prominence—starting the whole cycle over again.

When we focus on individual cases of state formation and dissolution (Figure 4), several unexpected details emerge. One is the aforementioned lack of synchrony between the growth of the core area around a state's capital and the growth of its overall political territory. The other is the discovery that warfare (Figure 2), long viewed as a destroyer of Mesoamerican states, was also a creator of states.

Numerous anthropologists[11,12,28,29,80,82–84] have argued that warfare was a crucial variable among pre-state societies and early states around the world. Past archaeologists, however, often idealized early Mesoamerican states as "peaceful theocracies," devoid of the militarism of later peoples like the Aztec. Today, thanks to the work of several archaeologists,[14,17,19,32,40,61,68,81,86–89] we are beginning to see that armed conflict was important from the very beginning.

Figure 2.
Maya warfare was depicted in murals, such as this battle scene painted on the wall of the Temple of the Jaguars at Chichén Itzá. Even from this small section of one mural, we can see many participants in a battle taking place near a Maya town in northern Yucatán.
PAINTING BY KAY CLAHASSEY

Figure 3.
Most Mesoamerican states consisted of a capital city, a core physiographic region surrounding the capital, and a set of outlying provinces that varied over time. Empirical data collected during the last 25 years suggest that early in their histories, many states invested a lot of effort in acquiring outlying provinces by alliance, conquests, or economic advantage ("Early Pattern"). This could happen long before population in the core physiographic region (small black dots) had reached its peak. Later in their histories, many states lost outlying provinces as the latter become powerful enough to break away ("Late Pattern"). However, it was often in this later period that population of the core physiographic region (small black dots) reached its peak. At this point, the state's major investment seems to have been in areas closer at hand.

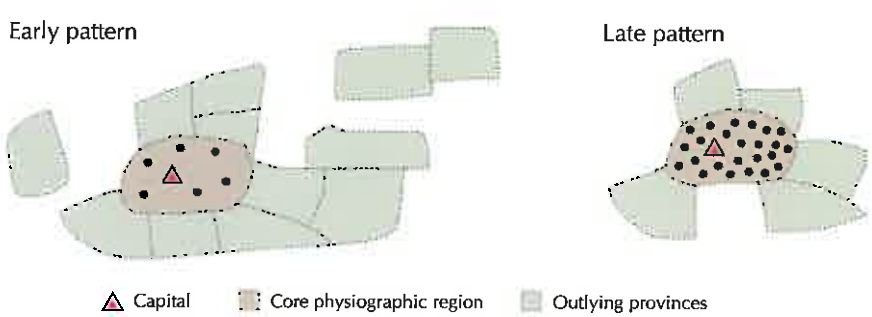
My earlier point—the nonsynchronous growth of a state's capital city, its immediate physiographic region, and its territorial limits—poses a serious methodological problem for future investigators. Capital cities for some Mesoamerican states covered 4 to 20 km^2, and the core physiographic regions immediately surrounding them could cover 2000 to 10 000 km^2. Surveying such regions is a staggering task, and even when it is done, one only has the demographic history of the capital and its immediate sustaining area, not the set of outlying provinces. Estimates of the total territory controlled by various Mesoamerican states, including outer provinces, can range from 20 000 km^2 to >100 000 km^2.[2,4,5,7,46,52] If it took W. T. Sanders, J. R. Parsons, and R. S. Santley[75] 15 years to survey the 7000-km^2 Basin of Mexico, it might take 40 to 200 years to survey an entire state. Some archaeologists joke that this could require a multigenerational strategy in which some surveys would be finished by the project director's great-great grandchildren.

The Central Mexican Case: Early History

Teotihuacan in the Basin of Mexico, one of Mesoamerica's largest pre-Hispanic cities, was once considered the capital of a "peaceful theocracy." The city itself has been the focus of an urban study by René Millon,[59,60] while the surrounding Basin of Mexico was subjected to the largest settlement-pattern survey ever carried out in the New World.[75] Founded by 100 BC, the city grew to cover 20 km^2 by AD 500, when its population had reached an estimated 125 000 (Figure 6).

Teotihuacan's urban growth was most rapid early in its history and involved planned immigration.[61] Perhaps as early as the second century AD, the main north–south and east–west avenues of the city were extended 5 km outward in anticipation of incoming population.[59,60] As an example of how Teotihuacan's urban growth depopulated rural areas, we need only look at J. R. Parsons'[65] survey of the nearby Texcoco plain. Between AD 100 and 450, the estimated rural population of that area declined from 12 000 to between 1350 and 4000 persons. Thereafter, 90% of the population of the Basin of Mexico lived in one huge urban center, while 10% lived in small dispersed settlements.

Teotihuacan fits the model of a state whose greatest impact on distant ("foreign") areas was early. Significant Teotihuacan influence from AD 350 to 550 has been detected at Kaminaljuyú in the Maya Highlands,[37,72–74] at Tikal in the Maya Lowlands,[16,58,66] and at Matacapan on the Gulf Coast.[61,73,77] Teotihuacan is thought to have sent noble traders to Kaminaljuyú, persons who eventually may have married into the local dynastic line. In contrast, at Matacapan, Teotihuacan is thought to have



militarily imposed a large colony on the region during the fourth century AD; from that base, Teotihuacanos came to dominate other settlements in the region through further colonization and economic control. At Teotihuacan itself, a small colony of Zapotec traders from Oaxaca was resident, perhaps as early as AD 300.[64]

In spite of continued growth of the urban area of Teotihuacan after AD 400, its influence on foreign areas, as well as on its own rural hinterland, gradually waned after AD 500. From AD 650 to 700 its direct control of outlying areas had diminished, the city lost population, and smaller polities arose to challenge it. At least 147 buildings, many of them temples along the north–south avenue, were burned between AD 700 and 750; elsewhere in the city, 68 other temples show evidence of burning.[61] After AD 800, Teotihuacan's estimated population dropped below 30 000, but it continued for a time as the largest community in the Basin of Mexico. Rival centers in outlying areas of the basin—Zumpango, Cerro Portesuelo, Cerro de la Estrella, Xico, and the Guadalupe hills—eventually arose to challenge it.[75] Outside the basin, but still in central Mexico, even larger centers such as Cacaxtla and Xochicalco rose to prominence, presumably taking over outlying provinces once dominated by Teotihuacan.

In support of the notion of peaceful theocracy, an earlier generation of archaeologists pointed to the 75 temples along Teotihuacan's main north–south avenue and to murals featuring religious and cosmological scenes. However, other murals show militaristic themes, such as the

Figure 4.
Similar patterns of state growth and decline can be detected in four regions of Mesoamerica: the central Mexican highlands, the Zapotec region of Oaxaca, and the northern and southern Maya lowlands. In this map, the blue triangles are places that became capitals at one time or another; the black circles are places that were important as provinces or colonies of states.

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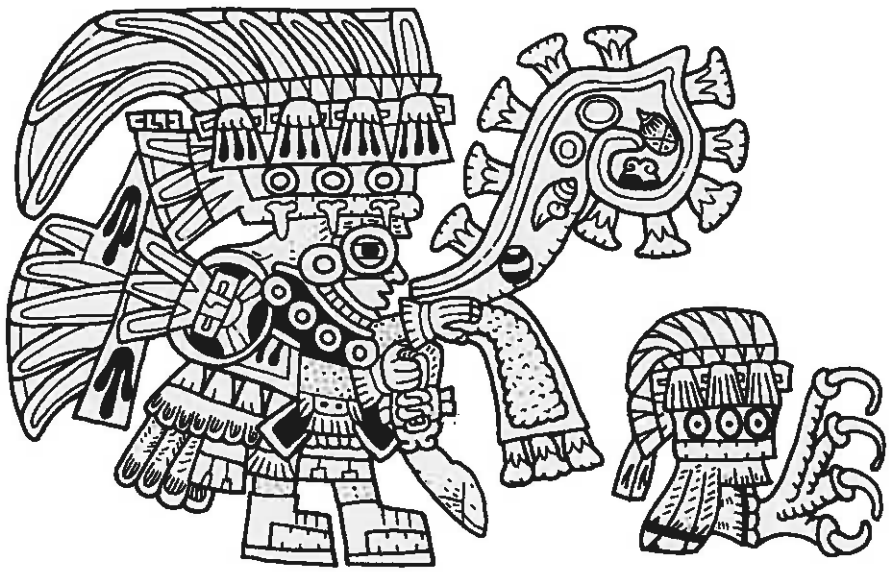


Figure 5.
Wearing the Tassel Headdress of an "ambassador," a Teotihuacano with an incense pouch utters a scroll of noble speech. His name or title is given at lower right as "Tassel Headdress + Eagle Claw."
REDRAWN FROM C. MILLON 1988

Figure 6. (opposite page, top)
View of the Street of the Dead taken from the Moon Pyramid at Teotihuacan. In the background (upper left) is the Sun Pyramid.
ALBERT MOLDVAY ©NGS

offering of human hearts, or processions of named military figures. Furthermore, R. Millon[62] has suggested that the apartment compound called Techinantitla once housed military officers of highest rank, men whose ancestors are shown in murals wearing a distinctive Tassel Headdress.

Clara Millon first called attention to the Tassel Headdress in 1973, noting that it was worn by Teotihuacan "ambassadors" who traveled to distant lands. Working with newly located murals, she has shown that each man who wears a Tassel Headdress in the Techinantitla mural procession is associated with a specific glyph, which she interprets as his name.[58] It is also possible that these glyphs convey military titles or ranks of the persons; I suggest this because the Tassel Headdress itself usually forms one part of the glyphic notation, while the other part includes a qualifier such as an eagle claw (Figure 5). C. Millon argues persuasively that even though the mural was painted around AD 650 to 700, the procession represents revered military ancestors from a more illustrious past (fourth and fifth centuries AD), the era when military ambassadors were sent to far-off Maya sites like Kaminaljuyú and Tikal.

During the 1980s, new work at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, near the intersection of the north–south and east–west avenues, buried forever the notion of peaceful theocracy. The temple was built early in the site's history (before AD 350), and its dedication seems to have involved the sacrifice of ca. 200 persons, mostly males with military gear.[10] The wrists of many were found crossed behind their backs, in a position implying that their hands had been tied. Similar sacrifices of military captives were characteristic of much later Aztec temple dedications in the same region.

Thus, while we still do not know the nature of the pre-state milieu out of which Teotihuacan arose, we see that the city's early growth was rapid and included typical Mesoamerican militarism with ritual sacrifice of prisoners. The advance layout of the city's main avenues implies planned growth and intentional resettling of rural population into the urban center. The huge size of early Teotihuacan may have obviated the need for defensive works; however, after the city declined, it evidently suffered some destruction by fire.

In its heyday Teotihuacan certainly controlled the entire Basin of Mexico, and while we do not know the details, it seems that it also controlled distant provinces, probably added by conquest, political alliance, economic advantage, or some combination of the three. Its "compact domain"—the immediate region it controlled—has been estimated at 25 000 km^2.[60] Areas as distant as central Veracruz (300 km) and highland Guatemala (1000 km) were affected by Teotihuacan, but they did not constitute an empire with contiguous territories. "Ambassadors" from Teotihuacan visited other states, such as the Zapotec of Oaxaca (350 km) and the lowland Maya region (1000 km). Some Teotihuacano ambassadors to the lowland Maya were depicted in military garb (Figure 7), while some visiting Oaxaca were shown in diplomatic dress (Figure 5).

This central Mexican case illustrates my point about the expansion of a political domain not necessarily occurring at the same time as population increase at the capital city or its immediate physiographic region. By the time the city of Teotihuacan and the Basin of Mexico reached their peak population (AD 600), Teotihuacan had lost its resident Oaxaca colony, its close links to Kaminaljuyú and Tikal, and probably some of its central Mexican provinces. This process of expansion and contraction is one we

Figure 7.
This Teotihuacan visitor was depicted on a vessel found at Tikal. Unlike the incense-bearing, "ambassadorial" Teotihuacanos shown at Monte Albán (see Figure 13), this figure is a warrior who carries weapons.
REDRAWN FROM C. MILLON 1988

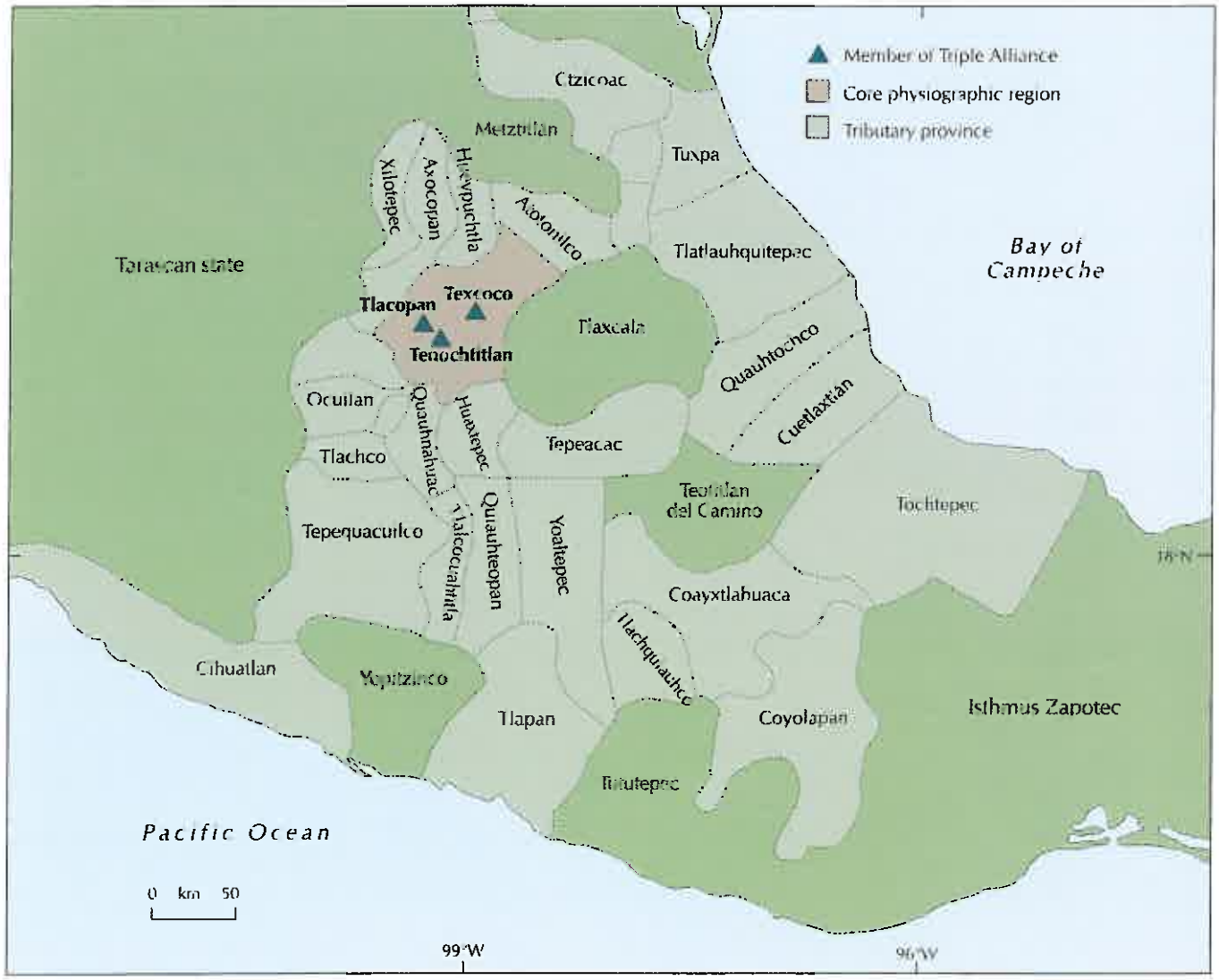


Figure 8.
The so-called "Aztec Empire" nicely illustrates some of the patterns described for Mesoamerican states. Tenochtitlan, the capital, formed a "Triple Alliance" with sister cities Tlacopan and Texcoco; they drew most of their support from their core physiographic region, the densely populated Basin of Mexico. Outlying provinces, shown in light green, were subdued militarily between AD *1440 and 1510. These provinces are not all contiguous because some areas, such as Tlaxcala and Tututepec, were too strong to subdue (Teotitlán del Camino was left alone due to a political alliance). Many of the outlying provinces such as Coyolapan, Tlachquiauhco, and Tuxpa rebelled repeatedly and had to be resubjugated. Had the Spaniards not arrived in* AD *1519, it is likely that many provinces would have broken away permanently; the Spanish Conquest prevented the Aztec state from running its full course.* REDRAWN FROM BARLOW 1949

would like to document more fully, but we cannot do so because the immense size of the state has so far prevented a complete and systematic survey of all the territory involved.

The Central Mexican Case: Later History

The cyclic nature of state buildup and breakdown is shown by what happened to Teotihuacan's former provinces after it fell. After considerable jockeying for power among roughly equal polities, Tula, a previously undistinguished town 60 km north of the Basin of Mexico, began to grow (Figure 14). Ethnohistory ascribes its spectacular florescence to Ce Acatl, the son of a Basin of Mexico ruler who had been assassinated by political rivals. Recent work at Tula by R. A. Diehl and colleagues[18] and D. Healan and colleagues[30] shows that Tula had grown to cover 13 km^2 between AD 1000 and 1100. Its urban population is estimated at 30 000, and its immediate core physiographic region had an additional 30 000.[75] The greater territory under the influence of the Toltec state can be estimated at ~14 000 km^2, but it may have been larger.[24] So far, only 1000 km^2 of this area have been surveyed.[55]

Ethnohistory ascribes the decline of Tula to political factionalism, with its last great leader, Huemac, emigrating to the Basin of Mexico in the 12th century. The demise of the city was evidently violent, since J. R. Acosta[1–3] found abundant evidence that Tula had been burned. Remnants of Tula's old nobility are believed to have settled at places such as Azcapotzalco, Texcoco, Xaltocán, and Culhuacán in the Basin of Mexico, competing for prestige and manpower until Azcapotzalco emerged as the strongest polity.

Whereas the breakup of earlier central Mexican states can only be studied by archaeological inference, the fall of Azcapotzalco was described to the Spanish *conquistadores* by native informants.[15,35] Several of Azcapotzalco's subject provinces were unhappy with its onerous tribute demands and mistreatment. The last straw came when the ruler of Azcapotzalco ordered the assassination of the leaders of Texcoco and Tenochtitlan. Allying themselves with other unhappy subject towns in AD 1428, the relatives of the assassinated rulers from Tenochtitlan and Texcoco defeated Azcapotzalco after a battle of 114 days and thereby achieved autonomy.[27] The cycle began all over again when Tenochtitlan gained the upper hand and began to assemble the expansionist state archaeologists call "the Aztec empire," a multiethnic and noncontiguous territory consisting of 489 towns in 38 or more provinces (Figure 8).[7,33]

Central Mexico thus shows a repetitive process. One polity, among equals, succeeds in subjugating its peers; it quickly adds outlying provinces while they are still relatively weak; it begins to lose them as they grow stronger or ally against it or both; and as the original polity collapses, one of its former provinces goes on to become the new political power in the region. Let us now see if this same process operated in other parts of Mesoamerica.

Figure 9.
One of >300 carved stones originally arranged in rows in a "prisoner gallery" at Monte Albán ca. 450 BC. The hieroglyphic name of this slain enemy is given; also note the genital mutilation.
DAVID BRILL ©1982

The Zapotec Region

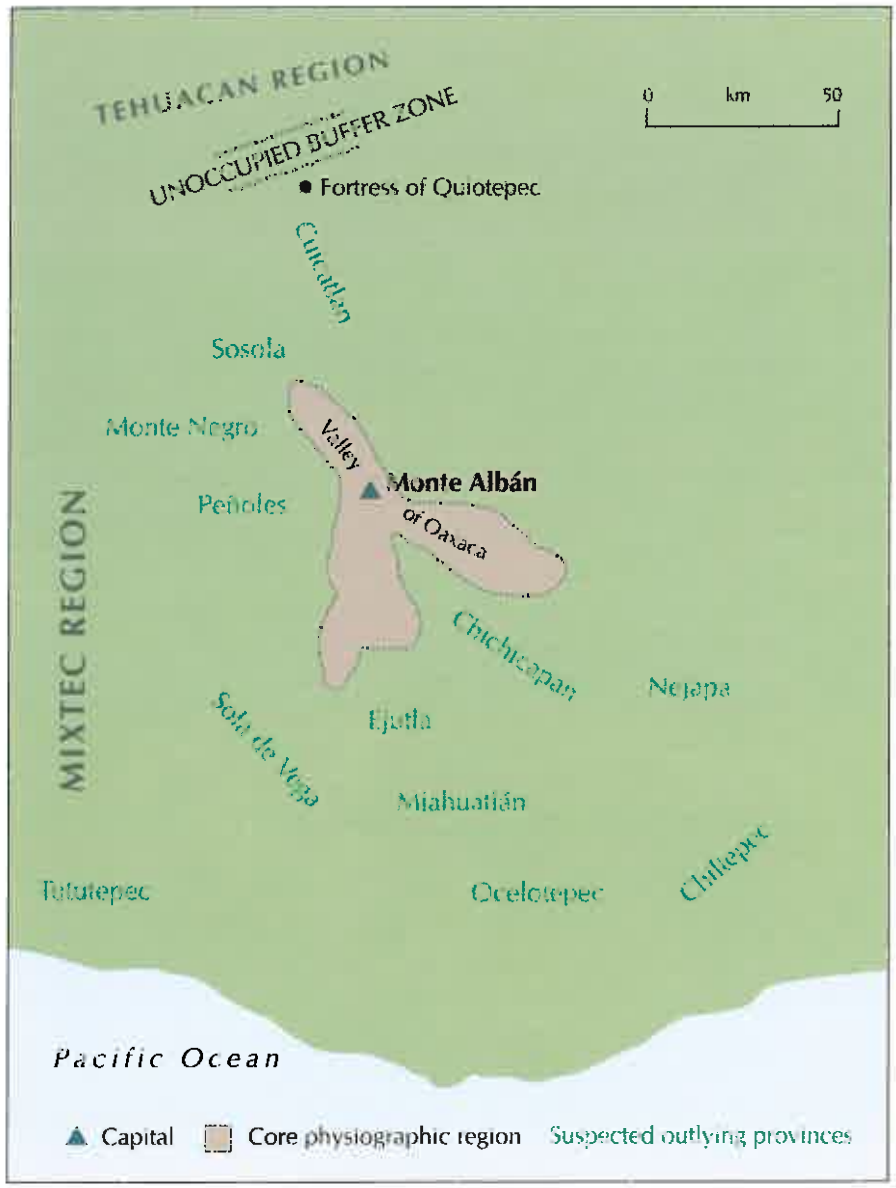
The Valley of Oaxaca, cradle of Zapotec civilization, occupies roughly 2100 km^2 in the southern highlands of Mexico. This area has been surveyed systematically by S. A. Kowalewski and colleagues.[39] Between 700 and 500 BC it was occupied by an estimated 2500 to 5000 persons distributed among 85 communities, the largest of which covered 60 to 70 ha. Although there is no archaeological evidence for state institutions at that time, society was run by a chiefly elite who wore jade, lived in multiroom adobe residences, directed the construction of monumental public buildings, and were buried in masonry tombs. There may have been three to four competing chiefly centers in the valley; evidence for intervillage warfare includes the first burned temple, the first carved stone depicting a sacrificed prisoner, and what may be the first small defensive wall for the region.[19,25,26,47,48,51]

Whether by cooperation or coercion, the whole valley was unified between 500 and 300 BC under one capital—Monte Albán, a new city on a previously unoccupied 400-m mountaintop. R. E. Blanton[9] has suggested that Monte Albán was founded by an alliance of at least three polities, whose separate residential wards seem to be reflected in surface remains at the city (Figure 10).

The process of bringing all these separate polities together may not have been peaceful. One of the most important buildings erected early in Monte Albán's history had a gallery of >300 slain enemies carved in stone;

Figure 10.
Monte Albán, occupying a fortified mountaintop 350 km south of Teotihuacan, was the capital of a Zapotec state between 150 BC and AD 700. It dominated its core physiographic region, the 2100-km² Valley of Oaxaca.

Figure 11.
Two of the >40 places claimed by Monte Albán in its hieroglyphic inscriptions of 150 BC to AD 150. Above, Sosola ("Place of the Pierced Face"); below, Chiltepec ("Hill of the Chile Peppers").



hieroglyphs give the personal names of prominent victims (Figures 9&15).[45] Prior to 150 BC, 3 km of defensive walls were built along the more easily climbed slopes below the city. By that time, the valley's population had reached an estimated 40 000 to 50 000 persons living in 745 communities; one third of that population resided at Monte Albán.[39]

By 150 BC, the Zapotec state had formed. There were palaces and royal tombs for rulers, standardized temples for full-time priests, depictions of warriors in military garb, and a four-tiered hierarchy of administrative centers with Monte Albán at the apex. Monte Albán provides us with a second case in which the territory controlled by a state reached its greatest extent long before the capital city (and its immediate physiographic region) had reached its maximum population.

One of the most important buildings erected at Monte Albán during this period displayed >40 carved slabs with the hieroglyphic names of regions claimed by the Zapotec as "subjugated." Those that can be tentatively matched to actual localities—Cuicatlan, Miahuatlán, Tututepec,

Ocelotepec, Chiltepec, Sosola, and others—lie 80 to 150 km outside the Valley of Oaxaca, seemingly forming a corridor from Cuicatlan south to the Pacific coast (Figure 10). It seems significant that when Monte Albán was subduing intravalley rivals at 500 BC, its hieroglyphic monuments used the personal names of its enemies; later, when subduing more distant regions, it used place names (Figure 11). Because there was a strong propaganda component to Mesoamerican hieroglyphic inscriptions, we do not know if all regions claimed were actually subdued. Moreover, some areas may have joined peacefully, through royal marriage alliance or for economic advantage. For example, there is evidence to suggest that the valleys of Miahuatlán and Ejutla[22,23,54] were closely tied to Monte Albán, but with no sign of military conquest, although such signs are often very difficult to document.

One area that evidently required conquest was arid, tropical Cuicatlan, 80 km northeast of Monte Albán. Here C. S. Spencer[81] and E. M. Redmond[68] found a local community sacked and burned, with the skulls of 61 of its defenders mounted on a rack. Not far away, the Zapotec built the Fortress of Quiotepec, which controlled traffic between the valleys of Oaxaca and Tehuacan. North of the fort, an unoccupied 7-km-wide no-man's-land marked the frontier of Zapotec expansion.

While population continued to grow both at Monte Albán and in its surrounding valley, the outer frontiers of the Zapotec state did not expand accordingly; in fact, many outlying provinces broke away as they became stronger, and others were taken over by the neighboring Mixtec. Between AD 200 and 450 the population of the Valley of Oaxaca increased to an estimated 115 000 persons, >16 500 of them living at Monte Albán. But the areas of highest population growth now occurred at an average distance of only 33 km from the capital, one day's travel within the valley.[39] Distant forts like the one at Quiotepec were eventually abandoned, while the number of fortified or defensible sites *within* the valley grew to 38.[19] An estimated 64% of the valley's population lived at such sites, suggesting a retreat from earlier frontiers under the threat of increasingly hostile neighbors (Figure 12).

Two possible reasons why the Zapotec state never expanded north of Cuicatlan were the difficult logistics of controlling such distant provinces, and the southward expansion of Teotihuacan's influence. A series of carved stone monuments at Monte Albán, as well as the already mentioned Zapotec enclave within Teotihuacan, suggest to Clara and René Millon that the two areas had a "special relationship."[57,60] The so-called Stone of Bazán, a carved monument from Monte Albán, shows a Teotihuacan ambassador (Figure 13) meeting with a Zapotec lord. The associated hieroglyphic text indicates that these two persons traveled, met, and conversed with each other; they also consulted diviners and burned incense to place their mutual agreement into sacred context.[48,49] This meeting suggests that diplomacy was used to establish a peaceful frontier between these two powerful states.

Monte Albán's decline began between AD 600 and 900, when it seemingly lost not only its outlying provinces, but also several members of the original alliance that founded it. Former secondary administrative centers in the eastern and southern parts of the valley—Jalieza, Lambityeco, Macuilxochitl, Mitla, and El Choco, among others—seem to have broken away from Monte Albán, while the northern part of the valley remained

Figure 12.
Tomb 4 at San José Mogote in the Valley of Oaxaca contained Individual 1 (an elite male older than 40 years), found with this obsidian lance head buried in his chest. The blow had broken his left clavicle and several ribs, while the lance head snapped 10 cm down from its point (length of surviving blade, 10 cm).
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Figure 13.
This Teotihuacan ambassador was depicted on the "Stone of Bazán" found at Monte Albán.
REDRAWN FROM MARCUS 1983

Figure 14.
Preceding the Aztec civilization was that of the Toltec, who founded their capital at Tula. Among the most impressive structures at Tula is Pyramid B with its free-standing warrior figures erected on top of the platform.
WILBUR E. GARRETT ©NGS

Figure 15.
Shown here are some of the named slain enemies depicted in the lowest row of the "prisoner gallery" at Monte Albán.
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Figure 16.
View of Temple II at Tikal and the line of stelae set up in the Main Plaza. These carved stones record the claims of Tikal rulers, including their dates of accession to the throne, marriages, alliances, and conquests.
OTIS IMBODEN ©NGS

Figure 17.
A prisoner depicted in the East Court of the Palace Complex at Palenque, Mexico.
JOYCE MARCUS

Figure 18.
At Chichén Itzá the evidence for militarism and prisoner sacrifice is substantial. Of particular interest are the "skull racks" or tzompantli, *in which crania are carved on stone platforms.*
JOYCE MARCUS

allied to the old capital.[39] (This is a pattern of dissolution we also see in the Maya area.)

Once again, details are lacking on the fluctuating borders of the Zapotec state because the area requiring survey may be 10 times the size of the Valley of Oaxaca. Inroads into this problem, however, are being made by surveys in the outlying provinces of Ejutla,[22,23] Miahuatlán,[54] Peñoles,[38] and Tututepec.[36]

Xochicalco: Another Central Mexican Case

We have seen that following the demise of Teotihuacan, several other polities in the central Mexican highlands rose to prominence. One of these had its capital at Xochicalco, a mountaintop administrative center 60 km southwest of modern Mexico City.[31,32,42] Founded by 500 BC, Xochicalco remained relatively small until the collapse of Teotihuacan around AD 700. At that point it expanded rapidly, building defensive works even more impressive than those of Monte Albán. There were barrier walls and ramparts as high as 2 m, dry moats and trenches cut as much as 3 m into bedrock, and a series of multiple, concentrically arrayed precincts that allowed the residences of the elite to be protected against attack (Figure 20). Associated with the expansion of Xochicalco to 4 km^2 was a major reorganization of its core physiographic region. Rural populations were nucleated into fewer but larger communities, and those centers with public buildings were placed on defensible hills overlooking the alluvium.

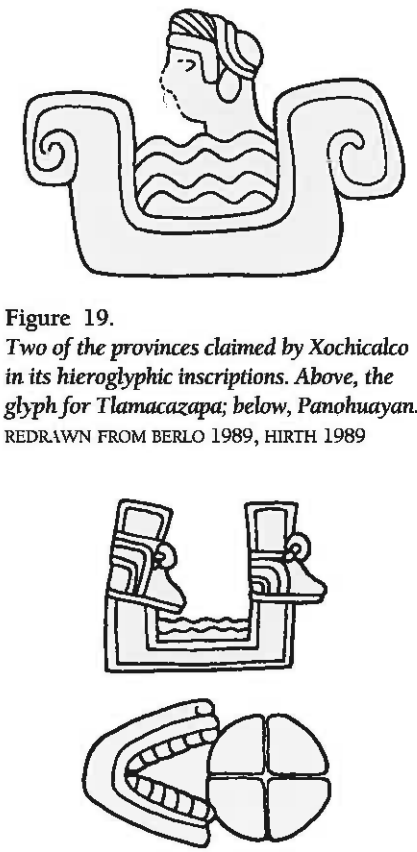


Figure 19.
Two of the provinces claimed by Xochicalco in its hieroglyphic inscriptions. Above, the glyph for Tlamacazapa; below, Panohuayan.
REDRAWN FROM BERLO 1989, HIRTH 1989

Between AD 700 and 900, Xochicalco reveals the same pattern we saw at Monte Albán. One of its major pyramids displayed carved stones with the hieroglyphic names of 28 places, localities presumably claimed as conquered by the Xochicalco state. The analogy with the 40 "subjugated regions" displayed earlier by Monte Albán is clear, and as if to leave no doubt that military conquest was involved, the Xochicalco pyramid also featured the carved figures of warriors in battle costume, carrying shields and darts for the atlatl (a pre-Columbian spear-thrower).

Like the Monte Albán case, most of the regions whose hieroglyphic names have been identified fall outside Xochicalco's immediate physiographic region.[8,32] For example, one of them—Tlamacazapa—lies 45 km to the southwest, while another, Panohuayan, lies 60 km to the northeast (Figure 19). K. G. Hirth[32] suggests that Xochicalco's domain extended north into the Ajusco Mountains bordering the Valley of Mexico, south and west into the Balsas River depression, and southeast into southern Puebla. If Xochicalco really controlled all the outlying provinces it claimed, its domains would have covered at least 10 000 km^2 (Figure 22).

Teotihuacan and Monte Albán may have used diplomacy to maintain peaceful relations along their frontier, and something similar seems to have characterized the relationship between Xochicalco and the other powerful states of its era, but in this case it looks like a military alliance. Once again, the evidence consists of hieroglyphic texts from murals and carved stone monuments.

Figure 21 shows four hieroglyphs from AD 700 to 900. The first is from Stela 9 at Monte Albán; the second is from Lintel 1 at Zaachila, only 15 km south of Monte Albán; the third is from Stela 1 at Xochicalco; and the fourth is from the Structure A mural at Cacaxtla, 115 km northeast of Xochicalco.[6,53] All four signs feature an enclosure called the celestial

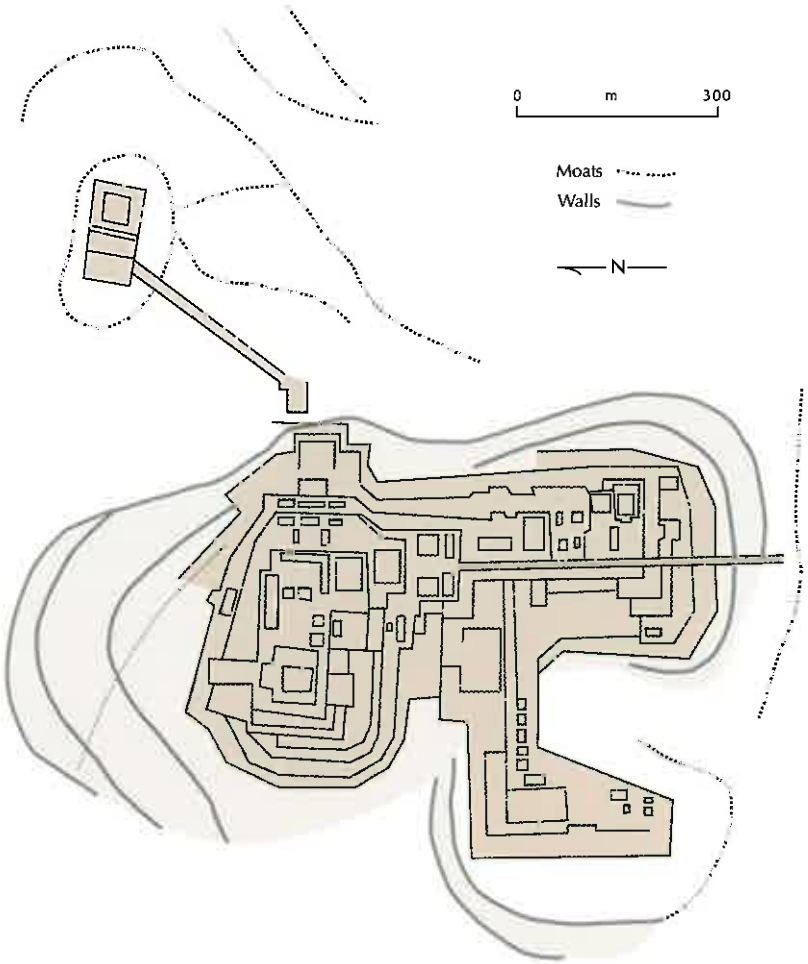


Figure 20.
Xochicalco, 110 km southwest of Teotihuacan, sits on a mountaintop fortified by a spectacular series of defensive walls and moats.

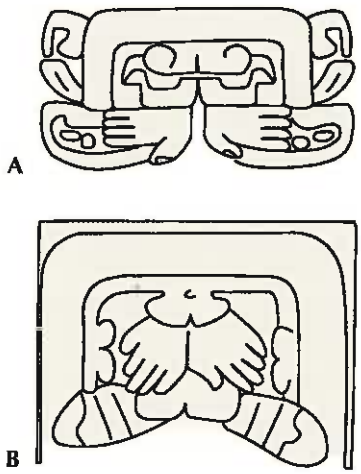
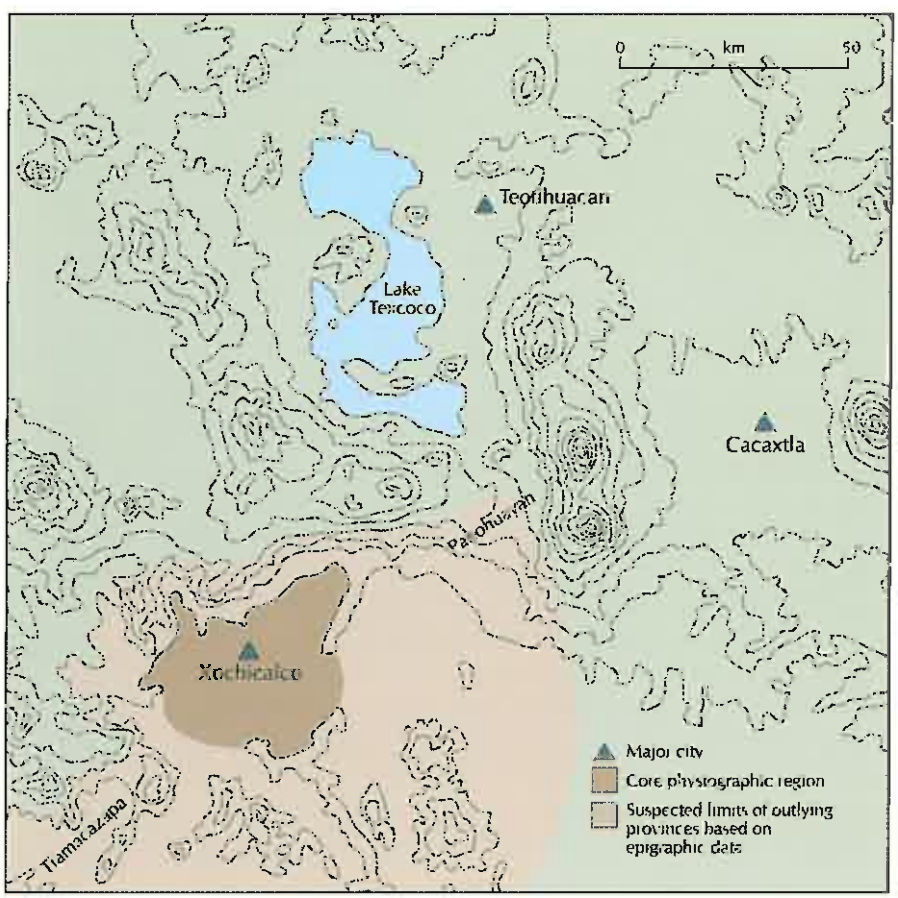


Figure 21.
The "Open Hands" hieroglyph within an inverted U-shaped enclosure called the "celestial frame." A: Stela 9, Monte Albán. B: Lintel 1, Zaachila. C: Stela 1, Xochicalco. D: mural, Structure A, Cacaxtla. In C and D, this frame is decorated with star symbols.



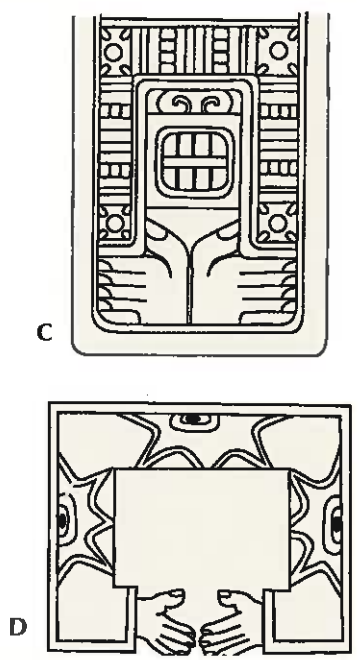


Figure 22.
Taking advantage of Teotihuacan's collapse, the Xochicalco state reached its apogee between ca. AD 750 and 850. The 28 provinces it claims to have dominated include Tlamacazapa on the southwest and Panohuayan on the northeast.
REDRAWN FROM HIRTH 1989

Figure 23.
A conquering warrior from Tikal, depicted at AD 378 on a carved stela from Uaxactún. In his right hand he holds a war club; in his left, he holds an atlatl *or spearthrower, a weapon already known to the hunters and gatherers who occupied Mesoamerica at 5000 BC.*

frame, sometimes containing the nose and mouth of a jaguar (Figure 21A&C). Associated with the frame is a pair of hands displaying open palms. In ancient Oaxaca the display of two hands with palms empty showed that neither held weapons; it was a gesture of peace deeply rooted in the ancient Zapotec language, in which the words for peace, empty hands, and palms extended all contained the root for the word palm.[53] It is possible that these four contemporaneous monuments all refer to some sort of alliance; its military nature is suggested by the associated atlatl darts and warriors shown on Stela 9 at Monte Albán, Stela 1 at Xochicalco, and the mural from Structure A at Cacaxtla (Figure 21A,C,&D).

Although Stela 9 was left standing in Monte Albán's main plaza long after AD 900, Stela 1 at Xochicalco was eventually taken down and buried. By then Xochicalco's grip on its greater domain had weakened; its territory ultimately broke up into more than 60 small polities of Tlahuica ethnic affiliation.[31]

The Lowland Maya Case: Early History

The 16th century Spaniards described lowland Maya villages as having palisades, walls, and other fortifications, so it is clear that warfare was an important concern in that region.[41,85] To the earlier archaeologists who believed in the model of peaceful theocracy, however, such accounts were thought to apply only to the late pre-Hispanic Maya, who had presumably been tainted by their "warlike" central Mexican contemporaries. In fact, warfare seems to have been common in the Maya Lowlands even before the state emerged. Defensive walls and moats are known as early as 100 BC to AD 400 at sites such as Becán (Figure 24), El Mirador, Calakmul, and Tikal; equally early are stone monuments depicting trophy heads being taken, or captives being trampled under foot.[51,63,89] Weapons of war, such as spear-throwers and lances, could simply have been adapted from the stone-tipped hunting tools known since 5000 BC in the Maya lowlands (Figure 23).[43,90]

Over the last 15 years, work by E. B. Kurjack and E. W. Andrews V,[40] D. Webster,[86–89] A. F. Chase and D. Z. Chase,[13] D. S. Rice and P. M. Rice,[69] and A. A. Demarest[17] has made it clear that militarism was always part of the Maya equation. Despite this mounting evidence, the peaceful-theocracy model has proved slow to die. Even today, some Mayanists argue that battles were only "ritual," fought between small groups of nobles "just to get captives for sacrifice." The many kilometers of defensive works at Tikal, Becán, and other sites tell a different story.

Between 400 BC and AD 400 there was dynamic competition among pre-state societies—sometimes called chiefdoms—in the Maya Lowlands. One of the first such chiefdoms to dominate its neighbors and become a state was Tikal, in the department of El Petén, Guatemala.[16,46,56,58] In one hieroglyphic inscription, Tikal claims to have defeated its nearest neighbor, Uaxactún, in AD 378 (Figures 16&23). Continuing to add provinces, Tikal eventually unified an area estimated at 30 000 km^2, extending west to Yaxchilán on the Usumacinta River, south to Dos Pilas on the Pasión River, north to Río Azul, and east to Naranjo in Guatemala and Caracol in Belize.[4,5,46] This large early state, perhaps exceeding Monte Albán's in size, was administered both through direct rule (placing male relatives of the ruler at provincial capitals) and indirect rule (sending

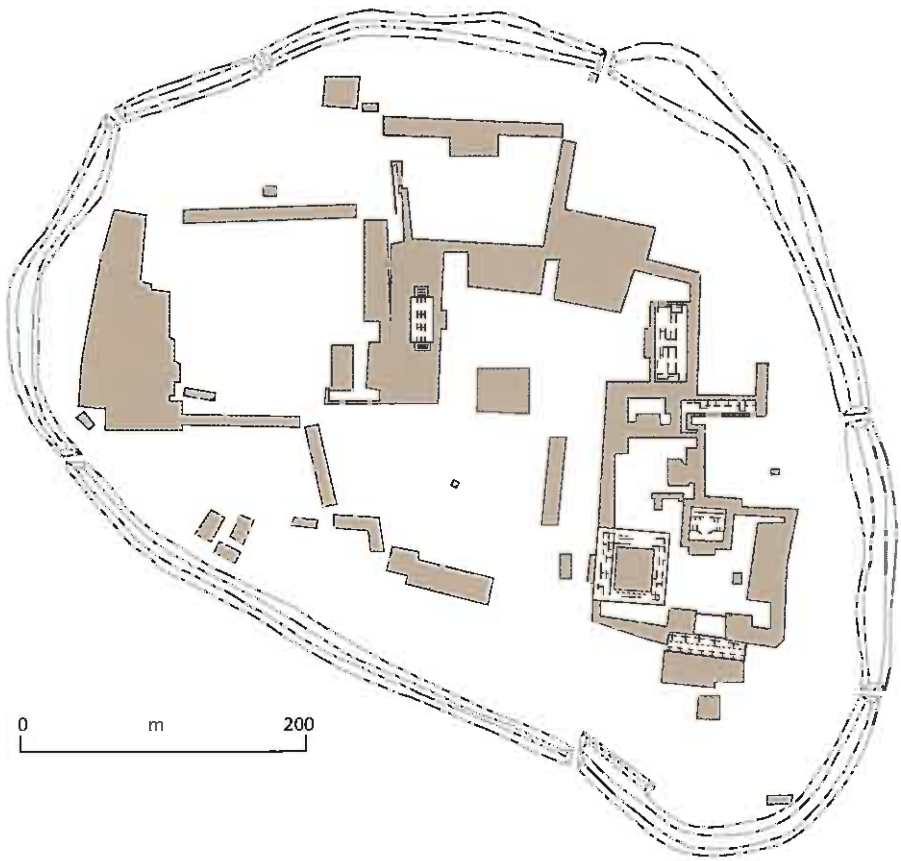


Figure 24.
The site of Becán, Campeche, Mexico provides us with an early example of a lowland Maya town fortified with moat and earthworks.
REDRAWN FROM WEBSTER 1976

female relatives of the ruler to marry the local lords of provincial capitals).[44,46,50,52]

The Tikal state lasted from AD 534 to 889 and provides another case where a state's maximum extent was reached early in its history (Figure 26). As time went on and Tikal's provinces became politically stronger, several broke away through wars of independence. For example, both Dos Pilas and Caracol claim in their hieroglyphic texts to have won battles of independence from Tikal, perhaps reducing its domain to 10 000 km^2 by AD 700. The fact that Tikal does not seem to have suffered any disruption in monumental construction at AD 562—the date given by Caracol for its victory[13,34]—suggests that we are dealing with the breakaway of a province, rather than the overthrow of a capital. After achieving its autonomy, Caracol went on to dominate a large territory of its own.[13,14]

To the south in Honduras, the rulers of Copán succeeded in unifying an area estimated at 10 000 km^2, from Quiriguá in eastern Guatemala to Pusilhá in Belize (Figure 27). Once again, Copán's maximum territorial extent was greatest early in its history, ca. AD 500 to 600. By AD 738, Quiriguá had broken away from Copán, commemorating its victory in a series of hieroglyphic texts and launching its own campaign of monumental construction.[20,21,78]

Copán presents another example of how difficult it is to cope archaeologically with large states. The city of Copán and its surrounding valley have been subjected to intensive survey of 135 km^2.[21,76] But the area surveyed—as in the case of the Valley of Oaxaca and the Basin of Mexico—represents only the core physiographic region around the capital, not the entire state with its outlying provinces. And as with the

Early in Monte Albán's history (150 BC to AD 150) its hieroglyphic inscriptions also claimed >40 outlying provinces (Figures 10&11). Surveys in other regions just outside the valley show major Monte Albán influence at that same period. When such provinces are plotted on a map, they suggest that the Zapotec were trying to establish a "corridor of influence" from Cuicatlan (the gateway to the central highlands of Mexico) to the Pacific coast.

Figure 25.
Sayil in northern Yucatán was one of many Maya sites in the Puuc region that gained population during the ninth and 10th centuries, apparently at the expense of southern cities that were losing much of theirs. One of Sayil's best-preserved structures is the Palace shown here.
JOYCE MARCUS

other states, Copán and its surrounding valley were still growing in population and complexity even after the state's outer provinces had begun to break away.

The Lowland Maya Case: Later History

The later history of the lowland Maya area further illustrates the cyclic buildup and breakdown of states. During the ninth century AD, some of the best-known cities of the southern lowlands—Tikal, Palenque, Copán, Yaxchilán, and Calakmul—had lost many of their outer provinces and were declining in importance.[46,52,79] At that very moment, however, cities such as Lamanai in Belize and Uxmal, Labná, Kabah, and Sayil in the Puuc region were becoming major centers (Figures 17,18,&25).[67,71] In the 11th century, when those northern states were collapsing, the city of Chichén Itzá in Yucatán underwent a short renaissance; and when Chichén Itzá fell, many of its former provinces came together to found the Mayapán state. For much of the period from AD 1250 to 1400, Mayapán ruled a territory estimated at 100 000 km^2.[52] And when Mayapán was torn apart by political factionalism at AD 1450, its territory reverted to 16 smaller provinces, each with its own head town.[70]

The lowland Maya case generates a proposition that could take decades to test—namely, that most new states began their history as the outlying province of a previous state. It might be that such provinces were just close enough to the capital to learn statecraft rapidly, and just distant enough to facilitate breaking away.

Figure 26.
In the Petén district of the Maya lowlands, dated hieroglyphic inscriptions document Tikal's rise and fall as the capital of a major state. Tikal began its rise in the third and fourth centuries AD. In AD 378 Tikal subjugated Uaxactún, and later brought sites like Río Azul, Naranjo, Xultún, and Dos Pilas into its sphere. At its apogee Tikal may have administered 30 000 km^2, although not all of its provinces were necessarily contiguous. Eventually, however, Dos Pilas allied itself with nearby cities and broke away; Caracol claims to have broken free of Tikal at AD 562. By AD 700, Tikal's territory may have been reduced to 10 000 km^2; its last monument was erected in AD 889.

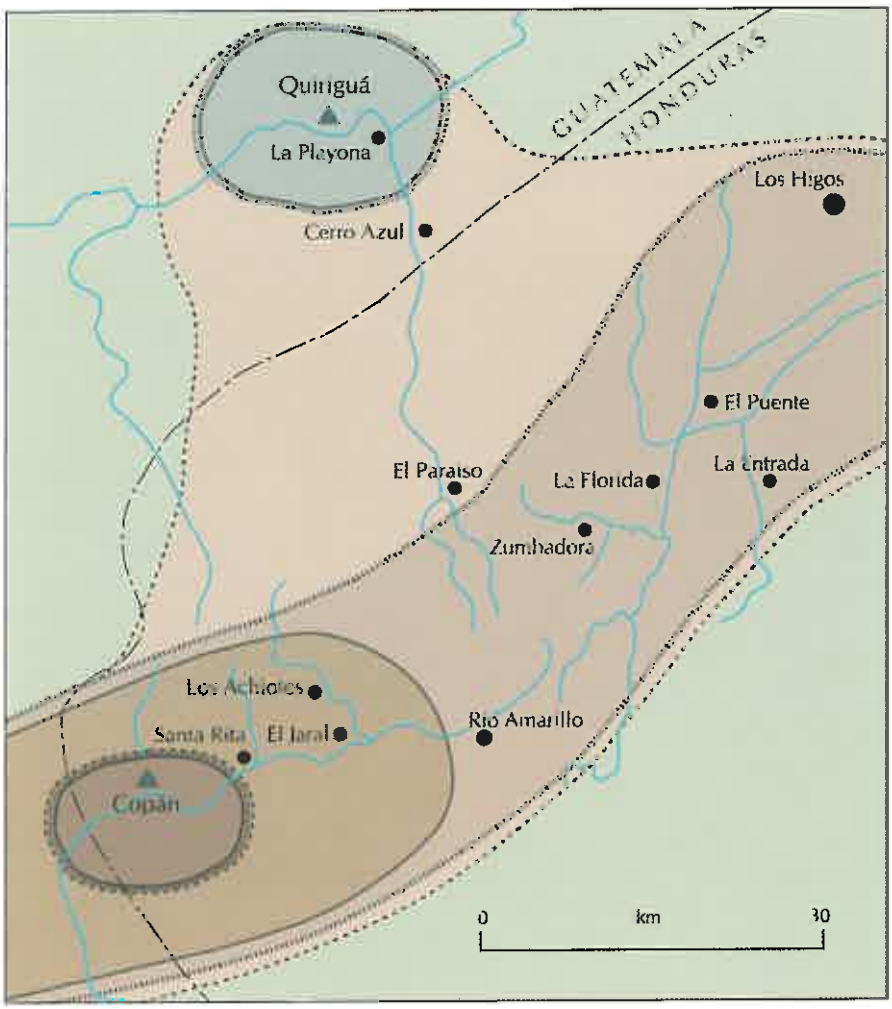


Figure 27.
Dated hieroglyphic monuments also help to document the gradual loss of outlying provinces by the lowland Maya state whose capital was at Copán, Honduras. Prior to AD 738, Copán laid claim to the area including the province of Quiriguá. After AD 738, Quiriguá broke away and established its own realm. After AD 838, the province running from Río Amarillo to Los Higos also broke away from Copán. Through it all, population continued to grow in Copán's core region. This is further evidence that population growth in a capital's core physiographic region is not necessarily a guide to what was happening at its farthest territorial limits.

Summary and Conclusions

Although future research will undoubtedly complicate this picture, it appears that archaeologists may be on the verge of identifying some pan-Mesoamerican regularities in the cyclic growth and decline of states. One pattern would seem to be an early spurt of growth, accompanied by an investment in subjugating or annexing weaker, more distant provinces. A second pattern would be a period of greater investment in the core physiographic region near the capital, after many outlying provinces had developed enough strength to break away. A kind of cyclicity resulted when one of those rebel provinces went on to become the core area of a powerful future state. A third pattern is that some small provinces may have been politically stable for longer periods than were larger, more powerful regional states. A fourth pattern is the early use of warfare as a creator of states. This evidence contradicts earlier beliefs that warfare was an innovation of "decadent" later states like the Aztec.

Archaeologists have done a good job of surveying the urban capitals of states and the immediate physiographic regions surrounding them. Now they face the more daunting task of surveying to the territorial limits of large regional states, to see how the outlying provinces were cyclically annexed and lost. A new kind of cooperation may be necessary, one that is multigenerational, requiring unusual patience from a group of scholars who traditionally have been eager to produce answers within their own lifetimes.

By AD 400, ~64% of the population of the Valley of Oaxaca lived at 38 fortified or defensible hilltop localities. Further evidence that warfare was endemic comes from Tomb 4 at San José Mogote.

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